SW Power Pool to hire 200 at new LR headquarters

The Associated Press

Southwest Power Pool Inc. announced Friday that it will build a $62 million headquarters in Little Rock and add 200 workers to its local operations — the kind of highly skilled positions that state officials have been working hard to attract.

The nonprofit company, which manages an electric grid across eight states, already has 440 people in Little Rock. Gov. Mike Beebe said the city was in danger of seeing Southwest move its headquarters to someplace like Dallas or Oklahoma City, along with the jobs there that pay an average of $85,500.

"There's a board (at Southwest Power Pool) with a whole lot of influence and membership from other states, and they have to make legitimate business decisions in the best interest of the company," Beebe said. "Sometimes there are factors that cause folks to move."

Southwest is one of seven regional power pools across the nation mandated by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. Beebe likened its work managing the electric grid to air traffic control, ensuring that each of its member utilities can buy the power it needs. Brown said it is a mammoth task.

"Some have described (the U.S. electric grid) as the single largest, most complex machine on the face of the earth," he said.

The company is preparing to close on 20 acres in west Little Rock. Chief Executive Nick Brown said having a single location that the company owns will enhance security. He said the facility will have 150,000 square feet of administrative space, plus 33,000 square feet of a "hardened primary operation center" that would enable the office to operate if there is a natural or manmade disaster.

Brown said construction is planned to begin in late summer and that some operations should be able to move in a year later, with the full staff in place before the end of 2011.

The new location will also enable the company, which added 100 employees last year, to keep growing. Most of its jobs are in engineering and information technology, but it also has accountants, in-house lawyers and billing staff. Brown said he hopes to fill the new positions with people from the area, who are more likely to be long-term hires.

Beebe said other governors have noted the state's success attracting jobs in a down economy. Arkansas has had only minor budget cuts at a time that its neighbors have lopped hundreds of millions of dollars from their budgets. The state has tax

credits and other incentives available, and Beebe has a $50 million Quick Action Closing Fund, from which he can write checks to companies that want to expand or enter Arkansas.

In the last year, the state lost about 20,000 jobs, more than 14,000 in manufacturing, but has countered with additions, including 10,000 in health-related fields. Next week, Hewlett-Packard Co. is to dedicate an office in Conway that will employ more than 1,000 people. Beebe said the company is planning to add more Arkansas jobs.

The state has been working to attract knowledge-based jobs, or high-level manufacturing, and Beebe said the strategy has been paying off.

"This is a company (Southwest) that's on the cutting edge," Beebe said.

Southwest manages electricity flow in Arkansas, Kansas, Louisiana, Missouri, Nebraska, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas. It also has a member in Mississippi. It was created in 1941, the product of 11 regional utilities that combined efforts to ensure a 24-hour supply of electricity to an aluminum factory.

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